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THE MONTHLY GULL BULLETIN

AUDUBON ASSOCIATION OF THE PACIFIC

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The 1930 Trip to the Farallon Islands

Through the kindly cooperation of Captain H. W. Rhodes, Superintendent of Lighthouses, and Captain Eugene Blake Jr., of the United States Coast Guard, a limited number of members of the Association were able to visit again the Farallon Islands.

Promptly at eight o'clock Sunday morning, August 24th, with twelve members aboard, a Coast Guard boat left Pier 3 for the Islands. The Captain and crew made us feel at home and were solicitous for our comfort during the entire trip.

An early morning fog had disappeared before our departure. Ideal weather prevailed all day and those present proved to be good sailors.

The usual Gulls were present on the inner bay. Small numbers of Northern Phalarope were either feeding on the water or skimming over the surface as we passed through the Golden Gate. A small flock of Pintail Ducks flew over our heads; outside the Golden Gate an occasional Murre was noted; further on Sooty Shearwaters crossed our bow and Heermann Gulls were resting on floating logs. Our boat nearly ran down a Tufted Puffin which seemed either unwilling or unable to dive or fly. A small flock of Ashy Petrels afforded our first thrill by flying a short distance ahead of the boat for some time. As we proceeded lone Pink-footed Shearwaters appeared at frequent intervals.

A brief stop was made at the lightship for two members to go aboard to pay their respects to the Captain and crew.

On finally reaching the Islands about noon, a quick and comfortable landing was made. Captain Kunder and the residents of the Islands were on hand to welcome us. After a brief visit we started for the birding grounds. Rock Wrens were the only land birds to greet us, although later House Sparrows were noted. Adult Western Gulls covered the rocks and filled the air; their continuous calling seemed to indicate disapproval of our presence.

A vantage point from which observations could be made was chosen to eat a hasty luncheon. From here several Tufted Puffins were noted perched on high rocky points; others flew out from their burroughs, circled and returned to them.

Upon resuming our walk toward the far end of the Island, two Black Turnstones and a lone Wandering Tattler were the first birds noted. Gulls, of course, continued to be present everywhere in numbers.

Next, a large group of Brandt Cormorants were observed, most of them not yet able to fly, but after awkward attempts at running and flapping of wings, they succeeded in reaching the water, where they were more at home. An occasional Baird Cormorant was seen resting on a ledge on the cliffs, and small numbers of Farallon Cormorants were noted on top of a rocky ridge on the north side of the Island. On a comparatively level area on the same side of the Island were countless thousands of Cormorants, mostly Brandt.

Not a single Murre was noted in the territory covered and only four individuals were seen on the water near the landing place, two of them immature. Also a small number of Guillemots were seen here.

Several burroughs were examined for Cassin Auklets and Ashy Petrels, but only decayed eggs were found.

Conditions existing on the day of our visit indicated that Western Gulls and Brandt Cormorants almost completely monopolized the Islands. In the Gull population, an amazing fact was the exceedingly small number of young Gulls. One would expect the young to far outnumber the adults, but on our visit they were conspicuous by their absence.

The return trip was without unusual event and no new species were added to the list. Seventeen species were found as follows:

Sooty and Pink-footed Shearwaters; Ashy Petrel; Farallon, Brandt and Baird Cormorants; Pintail Duck; Black Turnstone; Wandering Tattler; Northern Phalarope, Western and Heermann Gulls; Murre; Pigeon Guillemot; Tufted Puffin; Rock Wren; House Sparrow.

Twelve members present: Mr. and Mrs. Lockerbie; Mr. and Mrs. Stephens; Mrs. Kibbe; Miss Cockefair; Messrs Bryant; Cain, de Fremery, Jencks, Lastreto, Carl Smith. C. A. Bryant, historian.

Farallon Islands: Farallon (a high, craggy or precipitous islet), rightly named, as it stretches away with its high, rough central ridge rearing up nearly perpendicular from the rock benches on either side.

As one approaches the landing of these wind-lashed shores he can not but wonder where the homes of our feathered friends were before nature pushed these Islands up from the depths of the sea.

The white, gravelly bottom at the landing seems for a purpose as I know of no other waters where one may see the red feet of the Pigeon Guillemot at a greater depth and here, too, it rides the surf in diving just as the limpid green water churns into a milky foam against the rocks.

As one looks up at Gull Flat, a bench some twenty feet above the water and several hundred feet wide, with a gradual upward slope until it meets the nearly perpendicular rocks which form the ridge in the center of the Island, there seems to be an obstruction to the sun's rays and there floating on lazy wings are thousands of Western Gulls, adult plumage predominating.

Along the shore appear large patches of black which take to the water on being approached. They are young Brandt Cormorants and it is my opinion that this species have maintained their numbers in the last eight years.

Occasionally one would see the grotesque Tufted Puffin perched on the highest crag, and watching one in flight you wondered where it would go and how it would land.

A climb over the ridge gives a view of the rock benches on the northwest side and a sight long to be remembered. Several hundred feet below the great Cormorant nesting ground lay exposed to both the north and westerly winds, no shelter, no soil, only the scanty nesting material brought from the sea and laid on rocks. It is no wonder that the Cormorant does not take its nest-building seriously, as much time and energy would be wasted if it did.

The Murre is mentioned a great deal in the early history of California, and well may bird observers be thankful for those accounts, for on our visit to the Island not a single Murre was seen. It is true some were seen on the open sea and in every instance it was a mother and her single chick; and it is also true that the season this year was early, but even so one cannot evade the fact that the California Murre has diminished to a point where only hope is left.

Formerly the cheery little Rock Wren held for years, I believe, the distinction of being the only resident land bird on the Island, but now plebeian neighbors have arrived, namely, the English Sparrows. Carl Smith, San Francisco, California. September 24, 1930.

Bird Mortality on Farallon Islands: The mortality of young Western Gulls on the Farallon Islands was one of the outstanding surprises of our visit on August 24, 1930.

I have always looked upon this hardy pirate, breeding on a lonely rock island, remote from the natural enemies that beset the land-nesting birds on all sides, as particularly favored in the prospect of rearing its progeny. And yet, in two hours of slow walking about the Island, I counted 215 young and 9 mature dead Gulls. These probably represent only a fraction of the season's toll. Is such mortality in Gull rookeries the rule? If not, then what is the cause of it in this instance? Is it not starvation, principally?

It was on the smoother slopes, on level spots and in the little gullies, where nests were thickest and bird life most congested, that nearly all the really young dead were found.

Does the late-nesting Gull desert its young before they can shift for themselves? Possibly some of the young stray from the nests and meet death by being trampled on or pecked by other Gulls or, becoming lost, starve.

The fact that a large proportion of the dead birds were those almost or fully fledged, would indicate one of three things:

1. Desertion and consequent starvation;
2. Insufficient food with the same result; or
3. Death by disease.

The young birds encountered seemed unnecessarily awkward, indicating a weakened condition. Many were seen struggling along the water's edge in search for food. These were occasionally caught in the surf and it was only the best of luck if they regained a safe footing on the jagged rocks and then often in a most pitiable condition. We saw some which had been unsuccessful and had been either drowned or beaten to death against the rocks. Young Cormorants also had met the same fate.

Has the Gull's increase on the Island exceeded the food supply suitable for its young? By the condition of the "beach combers" above cited and from the evidence of their eating their own dead, one might think so. Everywhere stripped or mutilated carcasses bore mute evidence of a terrible struggle for existence. I surprised a young Gull which ambled awkwardly away from the lifeless form of another. The latter apparently had been dead but a short time and I noted it had just been opened on the shoulder. Both were probably fellows of the same nest.

While the Murre is in a decided numerical decline, this is not due to a lack of food but to the depredations of the Gull and the ill effects of the oily waters. The Cormorant is reported to be increasing, and the Guillemot, the Puffin and the Anklet to be holding their own, which would seem to indicate that the young of these deep-diving birds are faring better than the young of the surface-feeding Gull. C. W. Lockerbie, San Francisco, California, August 29, 1930.

Extermination of the Murre on the Farallon Islands

Eight years ago several members of our Association visited the Farallon Islands and marveled at the enormous bird population found there, especially of that of the California Murre, *Uria troille californica*. It was, therefore, with great eagerness that they again returned this August. But much to their disappointment they found a great change had taken place. The Murres were no longer there.

"Myriads" is the word used by Coues to describe the numbers in which the Murres congregated, making "every cranny upon the face of the rough, gigantic cliffs, alive with . . ." them, as records Keeler. Yes, over many large surfaces, flat, sloping, precipitous or ledged and broken, more of Murres could be seen than the bare rock of the Island. "Just a mass" on several portions of the Islands is how John Kunder, the resident keeper, saw them up to less than ten years ago, when, on returning after an absence of four years, there was "not a Murre left." These birds had been nesting "right down to the landing," evidently unaffected by human traffic there. "It would take the whole crew one hour to clear the tracks" (of a railway to transport supplies) "three quarters of a mile long, of the young."

I suggested to John Kunder that the depopulation had amounted to about 99% and he fully agreed with me. Yet, all day the twelve of us, assiduous observers, could find but four or five Murres; (four birds by one group of the party and one by another) while there should have been thousands to measure up to the remaining one per cent of the "myriads" of days gone by.

Other birds there were, yes, very many, but nearly all Gulls, the piratical Western Gull, *Larus occidentalis*. So far as I can find out, no authoritative judgment has been passed upon the practical or economic desirability of what is interpreted as a substitution. Gulls are scavengers, but there is little to scavenge out there and little would it matter if they didn't scavenge. Probably they feed upon the dumpings of the Oakland garbage boats that now go much further out to sea, some distance beyond the Farallon Islands.

Of what value the Murres? No one yet has raised a utilitarian argument in defense of that smaller bird that has been an object of affection to the bird lover, the lighthouse and lightship keepers and others of coastal seafaring life of whom they were companions. But long must have been the time that these birds in infinite numbers inhabited the Farallon Islands and other coastal islands and rocky promontories and during which the effects of their presence had crystallized into a permanent condition, an established balance of nature.

Then came man and found existing things to his liking, the condition of the shores admirable and the waters richly stocked with valuable fish. The Murres and also their diving, fishing cousins had a great cause and effect connection with fish life that was accounted as abundant. Its diminution can be traced to man's civilizing effect. It is the same civilizing influence that has been causing the extermination of the Murres and the diminution of other species, Guillemots, Petrels, Shearwaters, etc.

The immediate cause is the Western Gull, which plundered the eggs and devoured the nestlings. The Murre has no means of defense, its only protection being its immense numbers massed most compactly, closing openings of approach to the predacious Gull. They thus sustained their numbers, and there is no recorded diminution during the years that professional eggers robbed their nests continuously through the entire season up to near its end, then giving opportunity to the birds to incubate one, the last egg. After that the birds were left undisturbed in their congested nesting places and could protectingly cover their nests from their thieving Gull enemies.

Later (1897) the Government forbade further egging and in other ways protected the birds. But when oil tankers, returning to San Francisco to reload, emptied their ballast tanks far out at sea, large sheets of oil frequently floated to the neighborhood of the Farallons. The diving birds unavoidably had their feathers matted by the oil, so that flying and swimming were hindered. Or the clotted feathers exposed parts of the wet bodies of the birds while they were taking turns at incubating and they consequently perished from disease. The surviving parent was insufficient to care for eggs or young which became exposed to the cold winds while the bird was foraging. Vacant spots afforded openings for the Gulls which thrived on their prey. The least vulnerability thus opened multiplied in geometrical progression. Soon their numbers were too thin to afford the only effective protection their species possessed.

Thirteen years ago the Government authorities that had stopped the egging and otherwise done all that was possible and necessary to protect the birds, but were powerless to abate the oil nuisance, appealed to the Audubon Association of the Pacific. In prompt response we immediately influenced action that led to a considerable reduction of that nuisance. A good example was set by the Standard Oil Company, who unhesitatingly accepted our suggestions and lost no time in changing their operating methods so as not to have to spill and waste oil on the seas. Instead of their former practice they retained the oil aboard and recovered it in settling tanks ashore. The Associated Oil Company soon after did the same, and later on all the oil companies adopted this new method. So, with the exception of the oil from occasional wrecked tankers, for

years the waters on our high coastal seas have been clean, as confirmed by the keepers of the Island and the lightship.

But the remedy thus applied to the first cause came after the immediate cause had established itself; the Murres were already victims of the Gulls. Naturalists tell us that there is a constant relation between the normal mortality in species and the numbers reared by parents. Accordingly the Murre in a properly balanced habitat must have a high resistance and one strong enough to enable it to hold its own, apparently, even when man despoils it of all but one egg at the end of the season.

And thus large areas once inhabited by Murres are now covered by Gulls —a direct substitution. There appears to be room for the question whether these prosper, because a large number of dead, mostly young, but some mature, were found all over the Island. But even if the Gulls were attacked by some fatal condition—say deliberate human destruction—I think the Murre would not have a chance of rehabilitation, as it would have to be absolutely unmolested during the nesting season for a long period of years till it again attained to "myriads" in numbers, and only thus could be safe from even a few Gulls. C. B. Lastreto, San Francisco, California. September 13, 1930.

Notes on Some Bird Life Fluctuations on the Farallon Islands

It is fitting to record here the grateful appreciation of the Audubon Association of the Pacific, particularly of those members who were delegated to study the bird life on the Farallon Islands, of the hospitality extended by John Kunder and his crew of lighthouse keepers and radio operators, and it is particularly pleasant to give testimony as to their kindly, humane natures evidenced by their affectionate concern for the bird population and the transient, migratory visitors of the bleak, rocky, lonely islands in mid-ocean, as it were.

There was a tone of sentiment in their reports and answers to questions concerning bird matters. I here record a few of the observations of John Kunder, keeper for over a period of sixteen years.

Shags (Cormorants, the Brandt in greatest numbers, the Farallon fewer, and the Baird the fewest) have increased. They now occupy the east space of the main Island, where before there were none, but Murres instead.

The Rock Wrens decreased fifty per cent.

The Puffins vary in numbers each year; this year there was half as many as last. (We observed fewer by many than on our previous visit.) They have also emigrated sooner this year than usually, having also mated earlier. The weather was better with absence of northwest wind. When it blows, the birds appear depressed and inactive; so they were livelier and also enjoyed a more abundant food supply and the young grew more rapidly, because, for the same reason, fish spawn was more abundant.

There has come a great change in bird migration over the Farallon Islands in the last five years. Formerly transient visitors in spring "used to clean out the gardens," that is, the flower and truck gardens about the keepers' habitations. Ducks were very numerous. Geese would fly over in flocks, "six years ago," now none are observed. Kunder could give no explanation. Of the flight of migrants attracted to the lighthouse tower, he had this to say: "Thick flocks of small birds obscured the beams of light;" the mortality of migrants was considerable, sometimes very great; some mornings, "dead birds piled one foot high, but now none."

In conclusion I shall append a personal observation of my own. On the former visit we were interested in the nests of Cormorants, constructed of some flat, round matting of seaweed, many from a few inches high to chimney-like structures thickly clustered, particularly near the western end of the north slope of the main island. As near as my memory serves, there were a great many that ranged from two inches to six inches on the inner side and may

have averaged eight inches on the outer down side of the slope. We had commented upon the apparent annual superposition of layers. Thus there were many that had fully two feet in the free. Our opinion, or rather conviction, was that nests outlived the season and were used again the following one at least, and probably for several years. So the fact that this time we came a little later in the season and that the birds were earlier in their functions (according to Kunder) cannot account for our failure to find any nests as described. On that same slope we saw only a thin strewing of dried seaweed fragments and dust. C. B. Lastreto, San Francisco, California.

California Condor. *Gymnogyps californianus.*

On returning from a trip, about 600 feet below the summit of Mission Pine (San Rafael Mountain on the forestry map), there were fresh tracks of a large mountain lion along the trail. A few miles farther on, large, black birds were circling around a rocky knoll or alighting on the tops of a grove of fire-killed pines; two of the birds were Buzzards, but ten were Condors. The writer did not investigate the brush-covered slopes, but has little doubt that somewhere among the brush lay the carcass of a deer which the lion had killed and after his meal had left to the scavengers.

It was a wonderful experience to lie under a pine and watch the soaring Condors. Two were immature birds with blackish heads and bills; the others were adults with reddish-orange heads and necks and light colored legs stretched back under their black tails. As long as the writer watched the birds, not one took a single stroke of its wings, except when getting under way from a tree top. Occasionally the tips of the wings were flexed for an instant, but for the rest the great birds sailed and soared and wheeled, using for power the strong wind which was blowing. It was good to know that as many as ten of these rare birds might still be seen at a single spot. There might be regret for the slain deer, but lions and Condors are after all, if not intrinsically more interesting than deer, more characteristic of the wild Sisquoc cliffs above which the grove hung. Ralph Hoffmann, Director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Santa Barbara, California. (Reprinted from the September leaflet of the Museum.)

September Field Trip was taken on Sunday, the 14th, to the salt marshes near Baumberg, Alameda County.

The weather was clear, calm and warm, with good visibility.

The fresh water duck pond was visited first, then the levees westward and southward were followed, circling back to the starting point.

During luncheon, White Pelicans began arriving from the direction of the bay in flocks varying in numbers from eight to forty until no fewer than 500 were circling about.

The marsh that was formerly made by the overflow from the duck pond was almost entirely dry. The return to use of the salt ponds with the resulting human activities has caused a very noticeable decrease in both number of individuals and species of shore birds previously observed here.

Pintail Ducks, still in eclipse plumage, were in fair numbers, as were also Least and Western Sandpipers and Northern Phalaropes. Avocets usually noted in numbers well over a hundred numbered only sixteen. Four Greater Yellowlegs were also present.

The scarcity in number of species was partly compensated for by the presence and actions of three American Egrets, a new species for the Audubon's "life-list."

Two Duck Hawks thrilled the party with their performance. One captured either a Sandpiper or Phalarope on the wing, the other worried and chased the first until it dropped its prey. The falling bird was caught in mid-air by the second Hawk, who bore it away.

The presence of a Fox Sparrow in the weeds on the edge of the salt pond caused much speculation.

Violet-green Swallows in countless hundreds were perched on the wires of a power line along the salt ponds.

Leaving Baumberg some of the party went by automobile to Dumbarton Bridge, along the east approach of which a Barn Owl was routed out of a hole in the rock cut.

One member of the party discovered an unfamiliar bird on a mud flat near the drawbridge. Upon closer investigation it proved to be a Long-billed Curlew, the second record for the day for the Audubon's "life-list."

Snowy and Semipalmated Plovers were common along the levees. The Semipalmated Plover was the third record for the day for our "life-list."

Several members inspected the marshes along the east approach of the San Francisco-San Mateo Bridge noting Black-crowned Night Heron; Clapper Rail; Godwit and Pipit, which were not noted elsewhere on the trip and are included in our total.

Birds observed at Baumberg:

American White Pelican
Great Blue Heron
American Egret
Pintail Duck
Ruddy Duck
Turkey Vulture
Red-tailed Hawk
Marsh Hawk
Duck Hawk
Sparrow Hawk
Killdeer
Greater Yellow-legs
Least Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
American Avocet
Northern Phalarope
California Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Burrowing Owl
Hummingbird (Sp. ?)
Black Phoebe
Violet-green Swallow
Barn Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Shrike
Meadowlark
Brewer Blackbird
Linnet
Willow Goldfinch
Savannah Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
Song Sparrow

At Dumbarton Bridge and vicinity:

Western Grebe
White Pelican
Farallon Cormorant
Great Blue Heron
Turkey Vulture
Red-tailed Hawk
Marsh Hawk
Snowy Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Killdeer
Black-bellied Plover
Long-billed Curlew
Spotted Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
Western Sandpiper
Northern Phalarope
California Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Forster Tern
Caspian Tern
Barn Owl
Horned Lark
Plain Titmouse
Shrike
Brewer Blackbird
Red-winged Crow
Green-backed Goldfinch
Savannah Sparrow
Song Sparrow

A total of fifty-one species.

Twenty-six members and eleven guests were present.

C. A. Bryant, historian.

Aububon Notes

October Meeting will be held on Thursday, the 9th, at 8 p. m., room 19, 2d floor, Ferry Building.

The speaker of the evening will be Dr. J. M. Linsdale, who will lead a discussion on Problems of Bird Conservation.

October Field Trip will be taken Sunday, the 12th, to Lake Merced. East Bay members should reach San Francisco about 8:30 a. m. Take municipal car marked K, transfer to M car at St. Francis Loop beyond Twin Peaks Tunnel, get off at Junipero Serra Boulevard, where party will form at 9:30. Bring luncheon and filled canteens. Time from Ferry to meeting place about forty minutes. Leaders, Mr. Jencks and Mr. Myer.

Memberships for 1931 ($3 per year) received at this time entitle the new members to all the privileges of the Association for the remainder of 1930 free.

If you know of some one interested in birds do them a favor as well as the Audubon by passing this information on to them.

September Meeting: The 164th regular meeting was held September 11th, in room 19, Ferry Building, with thirty-six present. President Cain presiding.

Field observations were reported as follows:

Mrs. Lockerbie: September 7th, Dumbarton Bridge, thirty-five Pectoral Sandpipers. Mrs. Bracelin; August 17th, west lake of Gaylord Lakes, Yosemite National Park, Yosemite, Western Kingbird; same date, Yosemite, Mountain Blue Birds feeding young in nests.

Mr. Lockerbie as sub-chairman of the Research Committee gave a very interesting account of the research work being done on Swallows, Owls and Kites.

Due to unavoidable circumstances Mr. De Groot, who was to have been the speaker of the evening, was unable to be present. Through the courtesy of the Division of Fish and Game pictures of the Farallon Islands and one reel of the little Brown Crane were shown.

We also had the pleasure of viewing a film of the Farallon trip taken by Mr. Cain.

Audubon Association of the Pacific

For the Study and Protection of Birds

President	Brighton C. Cain	221 Thayer Bldg., Oakland
Recording Secretary	Mrs. Bessie W. Kibbe	Room 510, Russ Bldg., San Francisco
Corresponding Secretary	C. B. Lastreto	260 California St., San Francisco
Treasurer	Mrs. A. B. Stephens	1695 Filbert St., San Francisco

Monthly meeting second Thursday, 8 P. M., Room 19, Ferry Building.
Address Bulletin correspondence to Mrs. A. B. Stephens, 1695 Filbert St., San Francisco.

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Members are responsible for dues until written notice of resignation is received by Treasurer.